

## History of Independent Media Robin White

Introduction to "Beyond Video: The Media Alliance Directory I" (1984)

### THE HISTORY

Programs, projects and entire organizations devoted to video art and independent video production have proliferated in barely twenty years. As more and more people have been attracted to videomaking for non-commercial purposes, the need for supporting services has grown. The availability of grant funds from public and private sources has made the development of a support system possible and has given it life.

When the Sony portapak was introduced to the U.S. consumer market around 1965, visual artists were quick to adopt it as a new tool for art-making. They experimented freely with half-inch black and white equipment; some of the tapes they made have become the classics of a new genre of video production. Nam June Paik, Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas, Les Levine, Doug Davis and many other sculptors, performance and conceptual artists were, quite literally, engaged in the birth of a new art form-video art.

Meanwhile, the Videofreex in New York City, members of the Raindance Collective and other "guerilla television" adherents turned to the portapak as a political tool. They began working in their local communities and neighborhoods, shooting news footage and documentary material to produce television with an alternative point of view. Their views and activities were in close accord with the grass roots activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The media center evolved naturally out of the collective needs and efforts of the artists and independents who were inspired by the obvious potential to develop both a new kind of television and a new kind of art. Young Filmmakers/Video Arts was the first non-profit media center, established in 1968 to serve the downtown New York City community and offer access to equipment and training. Global Village opened up, a few blocks away, a year later. Non-profit alternative spaces exhibiting performance art and video tapes began springing up all over the state. In 1970, the New York State Council on the Arts established a media program and began to enthusiastically support the new, though hard-to-define activity.

By 1972 there were at least nine organizations in New York City, Rochester, Buffalo, Syracuse, Binghamton, Woodstock and Ithaca where producers could work with equipment at subsidized rates, receive training and do post-production. One, the Experimental Television Center now in Owego, (ETC), was entirely devoted to the production of non-narrative image processed works. Another, the Television Laboratory at WNET/ Ch. 13, (PBS's flagship station), provided artists' residencies so producers could work in the broadcast studios of public television. A third approach was taken by Media Bus, transplanted Videofreex who were co-producing programs with community groups in the Woodstock area for local cable television. The first university affiliated program was Synapse Video Center, at Syracuse University; the Center is no longer in existence.

Once a body of video tapes began to exist, the need for exhibition spaces and programs became pressing. As early as 1969, Howard Wise, founder of Electronic Arts Intermix, (EAI), was mounting video exhibitions in his gallery on 57th Street in New York City. The Kitchen was founded in 1971 to show performance, dance and video tapes. By the mid 1970s the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art had both implemented video

exhibition programs; EAI, ICAP, and Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films had begun to actively distribute tapes and develop a market for independent video productions in schools, libraries, museums, television and alternative spaces around the country.

Both the academic study of media and hands on training with equipment were recognized as essential concerns by a few individuals early on. In 1971 Media Study/Buffalo opened its doors. Community-oriented organizations such as Portable Channel in Rochester, Inter-Media Art Center, (IMAC), in Bayville, Port Washington Library, and Downtown Community Television Center, (DCTV), in New York City, also initiated strong production and post-production workshop programs. The New School for Social Research began its Masters Degree program in Media Studies in 1975. In the past four years, Communicationsphere, Light Audio Media Project, (LAMP), and the International Network for the Arts, (INFA), all affiliated with universities, have organized series of seminars including both practical training and theory.

While most of the organizations sent out periodic announcements of their activities, published newsletters and, more rarely, catalogues of specific shows or collections, serious criticism about independently produced works was published sporadically. Two Alliance members, the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, (AIVF), and Visual Studies Workshop, (VSW), have led the field in their commitment to publishing serious writing. AIVF's "The Independent" is published monthly and is devoted exclusively to film and video issues. VSW's "Afterimage," also published monthly, features reviews and articles on photography and artists' books as well as film and video. The Artists Television Network (ATN), has recently begun to publish "TV Magazine," which focuses on artists' television,

**The Next Generation:** During the mid '70s new organizations came into existence to deal with newly recognized concerns. AIVF was founded in 1974 as a national trade association to assist independent producers. ATN evolved out of a consortium of Soho producers who joined forces in 1976 to prepare for the arrival of cable television and a promised live injection point in downtown Manhattan. Much of their optimism was fueled by the universal belief that cable television would provide a more democratic TV and would also be a serious market for any and all productions. By 1982 it was obvious that cable was unable to live up to such expectations.

By the end of the '70s a second generation of videomakers emerged and began to make its presence felt. They have already studied the work of their predecessors in art schools and in university courses; they are comfortable and proficient with more sophisticated video equipment; and they face quite different prospects. Today, as in the past, independents still seek to develop high paying markets; they still need low cost access to cameras, decks and editing systems; the lack of public awareness and acceptance of their work is frustrating and painful, as it has always been; but other, newer needs of producers stem from the steady expansion of the field, from the quiet growth that has been going on since 1965. These days independents also frequently need legal advice, financial advice and administrative assistance because the market for their work represented by the closed-circuit, (non-broadcast), distribution network of schools, libraries, museums and alternative spaces is consolidating and expanding throughout the United States and Europe. And, because very slowly, cable and broadcast TV programmers here and abroad are recognizing the quality and the audience potential of independent and video art productions.

Some media organizations have responded to the change and are now providing these services to producers. The Women's Interart Center, 185 Nassau Street Corporation, Performing Art Services, The Kitchen and Cunningham Dance Foundation all function in an executive producer or co-producer capacity for one or more artists. Other media centers have responded to

equipment needs by modernizing their production and post-production facilities so that non-profit producers can work with broadcast quality systems at nonprofit rates.

Of fundamental importance is the growing awareness, within the video community, of the need to preserve its own history. Many of the half-inch black and white video tapes produced fifteen years ago are no longer in any condition to be screened. These tapes which constitute the earliest history of the independent video movement have been dangerously neglected. Anthology Film Archives received funding for a tape preservation program in 1983. They have been transferring works from the late '60s and early '70s on to 3/4" cassettes as an interim precaution until the high speed half-inch format is ready. The tapes are maintained in temperature and humidity controlled storage.

**The 1980s:** Most of the member organizations of the Alliance are now recognized nationally as leading institutions in the independent video field. Today, thanks largely to the pioneering efforts of administrators and independent producers, and to the high caliber of the work they have created, more museum curators feel comfortable exhibiting video as an art form; more educators are becoming aware of media studies and the need to teach video literacy. Funding, earned income and audience development are issues which will significantly affect the future growth of the independent video field. Non-profit media organizations must join with other arts institutions in petitioning the legislature for more public funds to support art as well as for access to local cable channels and home viewers. Access to money and to air time is always in danger of being withdrawn and is almost never increased.

On the other hand, the audience for independent work is increasing and signs suggest that it will continue to grow. Closed-circuit video presentations are becoming commonplace - in video game parlors, in nightclubs, even in department stores. MTV also offers an entirely new kind of television, (as does public access TV which has been perplexing Manhattan audiences for ten years). The traditional one-dimensional definition of video as broadcast television is dissolving as alternative venues and types of programming appear. Sophisticated general viewers are more likely to be open to non-commercial video programs and more tolerant of the idiosyncratic and unusual format and content of independent work than they were even three years ago.

Non-profit alternative media centers and arts organizations are another type of close-circuit video venue. They specialize in showing and supporting non-commercial programs. Collectively they represent a solid foundation on which to build a future where the independent electronic communication arts are more visible and more accessible to the public, so that their contributions to contemporary culture will be more widely recognized.